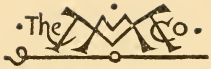
THE WAY OF PERFECT LOVE



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THE WAY OF PERFECT LOVE

BY

GEORGIANA GODDARD KING

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ARGUMENT

LIONELLA, the daughter of the late Duke, being untouched by love, lived a maid among her seven handmaidens, seeking always to understand love's nature, until one time, — whereas the Duke, her cousin, had long since sought her in marriage vainly, — a Strolling Player drew her away to follow him over the world. Finding at last that he loved her less than the freedom of the soul, she found the courage to send him from her. Then she was sheltered by a Shepherd, whom — he worshipping her as something half-divine — she came to love in his turn, until the years brought by the Wayfarer again and renewed the summons of the unknown and the unfettered, breaking up her life of simpler affections. The Lady Lionella, thereupon, detached from the Wayfarer and the Shepherd alike, and withdrawn alone into the deep woods, was further purified by fasting and contemplation, and prepared for her ultimate destiny of marriage with her cousin, the assumption of duties of state, the care of her father's subjects. Her presence in the Palace had not been missed, for her Waiting Gentlewomen had by turns supplied her place; her reappearance in the world was the signal, throughout the duchy, for indescribable happiness.

The Shepherd, turning from earthly love to heavenly, had moved steadfastly meanwhile towards perfection; so likewise had Messer Peregrino, following, through all these years, with a soul emancipate, desire unattainable and therefore immortal.

THE WAY OF PERFECT LOVE

ACT I

In the garden of the Duchess's pleasure-palace. The Duchess; her seven Waiting Gentlewomen.

THE SEVEN GENTLEWOMEN

Welladay!
Love is a tyrannous lord.
How shall we worship accord
Or set our feet in his way?

Lord of the world
And of life the master!
The stars are whirled
In their orbits faster
By his wings unfurled.
Welladay,
Love is a tyrannous lord!

DUCHESS

My gentle hearts, what is your song?
Though I have worshipped now so long
I think I have not known this love,
But as flowers track the sun above,
Who lightens many ardent lands.
Orsola, unclasp those slender hands,
To tell me love, from the lute's neck.

ORSOLA
Love is the flower most apt to deck
Our beauty; when the feast is done,
Colour, savour, alike are gone.

DUCHESS
Silent Laodomia, over-wise,
What wisdom smoulders in your eyes?

LAODOMIA
'Tis the amulet o'ercharacterèd
Whose virtue is lost if it be read
Even by him who hath control;
I mean, the master of my soul.

DUCHESS
Unknit, Isotta, archèd brows,
Unveil gold-crispèd locks, and rouse
The dreaming heart its dream to tell.

ISOTTA
I do repudiate your spell:
Love is a perfect polity
Where two a single creature be,
Each takes, for leave to give, — in fine
Each is the other's only *mine*.

DUCHESS
Arianna of the long white throat,
Your lauds?

ARIANNA
I cannot praise by rote.
I hold love's power a wanton boy's,
Unequal to the soul's grave joys.

DUCHESS
Fiammetta's lips are fine and thin,
A live pale red; can they speak sin
Against love's godhead?

FIAMMETTA
Love is a fire,
Madonna, immortal bright desire,
Self-fed and unconsumed, the same
As that bush Moyses saw aflame.
Who knows vain love, he knows as well
How look the Blessed watched from hell:
Who knows love's gladness fears not God,
He touches heaven's period.

DUCHESS
Have a care, child!

ORSOLA
Your blown words flare
Like lambent tongues of flame.

DUCHESS
Declare
Of ageless love the ultimate test,
Mafalda of the warm brown breast.

MAFALDA
I cannot speak, I. Let me sing
An old, plain ditty; a weary thing
That children shrill when they would dance,
Not knowing its significance.

Pray you, have you seen my love
On the road you came?

Each one knows him as he goes
By the badge of shame.

So at last I hold him fast
Past the Judgment-morning,
Heart may break, but love will reck
Of wrong no more than scorning.

IPPOLTYA
That way God loves us. But for me
I'd wish my lover a spreading tree
Whence to break buds for coronals
Wreathing, upon high festivals,
My hair's dense darkness: he, the while,
At my child's play should softly smile.

DUCHESS
The wheel swings round: twice in the hour
Has love, heighho, been but a flower!
Maids, shall we sing, or with slim grace
Trip on this chequered grassy space,
In sphery turns weaving a measure?

Laodomia and Orsola resume their lutes, Arianna, Mafalda and Fiammetta stand ready to wheel in the dance, when the Duke approaches.

Excellence, welcome. Is it your pleasure
Music to hear, or converse share?

DUKE
Let me but watch upon your hair
The flecks of sunlight fallen through green
Wavering as shifts the beechen screen;
Forget, all you, that I am by.

DUCHESS
So be it. Isotta, music try.

ISOTTA
Now comes the May time, the wild hawks' play-time,
With long blithe daytime and warm night showers:
In tangled cover each feathered lover
Sings one song over the white thorn flowers.

Yield, maiden quire, to love's empire,
Love's scorn is dire, ruthless his quarrel.
Syrinx a reed is, Adon to bleed is,
All Daphne's speed is to fruitless laurel.

DUCHESS
Is there no word to-day but love?

DUKE
What better could we reason of?

DUCHESS
Have you known his radiant face
Or tasted the dew of his grace?
Tell me what signs declare him,
Who his father, who bare him,
What his service, and all
Of his solemn ritual.
The high doctrine unfold!

DUKE
It is a doctrine old:
It is a rule austere.
Princess, have you no fear?
These immortal mysteries
Are not for laughter-litten eyes.

DUCHESS
We are grave disciples, who would win
To adept's place.

IPPOLYTA
Ere he begin,
Maidens, close in at either hand
Like curving wings.

DUCHESS
There, Duke, you stand.

DUKE
How can man's words, that change and shiver
Like stormy sunshine on a river,
That splendour-wingèd spirit compel,
Inàccessible, unalterable,
Express the unravished constancy
Set above time and change on high?
Love, of man's heritage, only is free
From the stress of mutability.

DUCHESS
Yet a hard saying, Master, this.
Are all those passions named amiss
That like the moon wax and grow lean,
Or, moon-like, have their image seen
In dimpled spring and lucent pool?
Girls, are these heretics of love's school?

ARIANNA
Rather, the right initiate,
No traitor to love's high estate,

Loves not the incomparable She,
But beauty, wheresoe'er that be.
Some are love's lovers, and can that lie
In a white hand, or a quick eye?

DUCHESS
Let me rehearse a little. So
Not shadowing hair nor temples' snow
Love men, but Beauty, which abides
In us some fleeting halcyon-tides:
Not ardour, honour, loyalty,
Though for a scruple a maid should die,
Foster, but love, who nests perhaps
A season in these silken laps,
Till the poor perishing flesh is dust?
Amen, if so believe I must!
A moment stay. Lend me your hands,
Sweethearts: these weary plaits and strands
Intricate coiled of heavy hair,
Make my head ache. Child, loose that; there. . . .

DUKE
O jewel of pearl and sand-searched gold
Wrought by dead craftsmen for some old
Dead princess, eastward of the sun,
And deftly cusped and wrought upon
With stones of all the bland bow's colours seven!
O virgin sunflower in the top of heaven,
With seven star-flowers ringed! O harmony
That complicates all webs of melody!
Lift up your hearts. Let faith approve:
Behold the way of perfect love!
Love, first begotten of all created things,

Above the void hung on strong brooding wings
Till light sprang up, and straight from love and light
Were earth and heaven born, and day and night;
Green cranny-moss, and thousand-year-old tree,
And all the swift folk of the air and sea;
The furry tribes; and man, that sole knows why
He has been born — which is to love, and die.
The starry flock their orbits implicate
Hold, amid which the great sun moves in state;
By sweet compulsion, each constraining each,
They weave across the skies their soundless speech.
The sad white moon wanders the earth around,
While as she goes blue ocean breaks his bound
To follow, and through all the secular quest
To her pulse heaves his vast tumultuous breast.
Fiammetta, Isotta, Laodomia,
Mafalda, Arianna, Orsola,
Ippolyta, and — great and gracious one,
Lioness coloured of the tropic sun,
Superb — Lionella, give me a graver mind,
For this before was but of love of kind.
Unfit your ears to hear, my lips to tell,
Of the light loves in marish-pools that dwell,
Or what gross sorts frequent the trough and mire.
Upward tends love, part of the primal fire
Which streams, incorporal flame, in the noble heart,
Being all in heaven and all in every part.
Loveliness, equal in her heavenly birth,
Do ye not encounter errant over earth
Having donned mortal vesture? What, do your eyes
Repeat their green light from terrestrial skies?
Then, love goes seeking his immortal twin,
And the unimagined form he sees her in

Reverent he worships straight; yet if thereafter
What seemed all wisdom prove but theme for laughter,
What seemed clear fire prove but painted glass,
Nought rests for love but wearily to pass
Upon his timeless pilgrimage, and pray
That beauty unearthly yet may cross his way;
For, one at first with beauty, he holds the quest
Till the two souls, made one soul, shall find rest.
So much for love imperfect, how it gains
Perfection. Now of perfect love remains.
You have grieved for flesh, that pales and falls to dust,
But what is patience, lady, what is trust,
But the flesh worshipping a bodiless power
In faith that at the fixed, the ultimate hour,
He entering fills the shrine with so great glory
That all pain past is a forgotten story,
Yea, doth augment delight, as strings harsh-sounding
Mix into music sweetness more abounding?
Some say, a bitter lordship is this same,
Calling his servants wan-hope, worldly shame,
And drowsy grief, and lidless vain desire,
And blind death: — these adore a devil, a fire
Earth-kindled, gluttonous as the ravening wave.
No man is free that owns a single slave,
The emperor said, nor rich, but who hath nought,
Nor he at peace who can be pricked in aught.
And therefore perfect love must ever be
A beggar gaunt, living on charity,
Craving no thing of right but all of pity.
A beggar? No; throned, from his royal city
He reigns to grant, and all the spoils of sense
He lavishes of his magnificence:
And all the spirit's splendours he will shower

Idly as one of you ruffles a flower:
To crown with goods is his: taking, be sure,
His magnanimity could not endure.
Mark, he does more. To the Belovèd he
Does of free will, true service, and is free.
Even as he laid delight and all sweet things
At the dear feet, so now desire he brings,
And last, the will: and having put that off
Goes healed and free. Say, is not love enough?

DUCHESS
Highness, you have praised royally,
Gracing your subject. Say not ye
So, maidens seven?

THE SEVEN
We had not thought
Dear lord, to be so nobly taught.

DUCHESS
What, you change colour, you are not well?

DUKE
Madonna, the ancient miracle;
The priest who speaks the consecration
Must shrink before the revelation
Of very God between his hands:
Let him confirm who understands.
My soul is shaken — permit I go.

DUCHESS
Cousin, and would you leave us so,
With many fine points yet unraised
And many an attribute unpraised?

DUKE
Pity! Ah, cousin, I love in vain,
And love at ease is a dear pain,
But love at uttermost, agony.
Suffering its swift ascendency,
I pray, dear ladies, for your talk
All delicate pleasures as you walk.

He goes slowly down the cypress alley.

DUCHESS
Fiammetta, take the lute and sing.

FIAMMETTA
Madonna, what?

DUCHESS
Some quiet thing.

FIAMMETTA
Dear to the sailor-kings,
Bronze-bearded, steadfast-hearted,
Oars' dash, when galley swings
Black through the grey waves parted.
But they said: "Make the cove
Where breathes a moonless grove,
And larks hang glad
O'er pebbly pools and sweet;
He sickens with the heat,
Our little lad."

THE SEVEN
So they call, the gold-browed kings,
Hylas, Hylas, Hylas! clear;

And Alcides' great voice rings, —
For he loved the brown child dear.

FIAMMETTA

He left the blue profound
To follow winding valleys;
He lost the surf's faint sound
In aspen-shivering alleys.
Beside the freshes cold
He found white fingers hold
His brown hand hot;
He heard an elfin song;
The dark kings waited long
But he came not.

THE SEVEN

Yet they call him from the shore,
Hylas, Hylas, Hylas! thrice;
But Alcides sails no more,
Remembering the drowned child's eyes.

DUCHESS

I thank you, sweet. The sun is low,
Between the orchard trees a-row
The warm gold washes. Listen, a swell
Of hushed notes, very tuneable!
Look out, Mafalda, through the trees.

LAODOMIA

Stay, 'twixt the rows of cypresses
One comes, or by the yew-tree arch.

DUCHESS

The voice is like the rain in March.

ORSOLA
He loiters by the ragged fir.

MAFALDA
Madonna, 'tis a lute-player
With a strange-fashioned silver lute.

IPPOLYTA
And hark, the nightingales are mute!

FIAMMETTA
A dark rose opens its moth-kissed leaves.

PIEPOWDER
Something calls and whispers, along the city street,
Through shrill cries of children and soft stir of feet,
And makes my blood to quicken and makes my flesh to pine.
The mountains are calling; the winds wake the pine.

ARIANNA
Madonna Lionella walks here eves,
Wayfarer.

LAODOMIA
If you are astray
Let us two set you in your way.

PIEPOWDER
The turf its dewy cool preferred,
And dusty feet unwitting erred.
Yet, since you pardon their offence,
Will you not, gracious handmaidens,
Or will her Highness, leave bestow,
To end singing before I go?

FIAMMETTA
Madonna — if it be not too long!

DUCHESS
Fetch him, Fiammetta. Friend, your song.

PIEPOWDER
Past the quivering poplars that tell of water near
The long road is sleeping, the white road is clear.
Yet scent and touch can summon, afar from brook and tree,
The deep boom of surges, the grey waste of sea.

Sweet to dream and linger, in windless orchard close,
On bright brows of ladies to garland the rose,
But all the time are glowing, beyond this little world,
The still light of planets and the star-swarms whirled.

DUCHESS
What are you, and what make you here so late
That gillyflowers and stocks shake out their myrrh,
Down all our pleasaunce alleys hushed and strait,
Towards a dead sun, O starry voyager?

PIEPOWDER
You are pleased to mock me, Excellence,
Yet know me, by the evidence
Of dusty feet and tireless heart,
Free of the desert as the mart.
I have marched in half a score of wars
In this flesh, or among the stars
Before I put on humdrum clay.

IPPOLYTA
You are sure?

PIEPOWDER

Nay, doth not Plato say?
Sadly, madonna, I am a poor
Strolling player of grave allure:
Your steward gave me liberty
That I and my quaint company
Might in the city square rehearse
An excellent comedy in verse,
This evening, after compline said.
Leaving the palace, I was led
Of my kind genius to this spot.
Your beauteous Grace can blame it not?

LAODOMIA

You are the mocker, as I think.

PIEPOWDER

Good sweet, should wisdom never wink?

ORSOLA

Your fingers on the instrument
Followed well where the sweet voice went.

PIEPOWDER

God gave to a hand dexterity,
And unto feet inveteracy,
And to a spirit the wind's will,
To blow all ways but ne'er be still.

DUCHESS

Touch at your pleasure the light string.

PIEPOWDER

Then hear more praise of wandering.

A man called Dante, I have heard,
Once ranged the country-side,
He knew to dawn's mysterious word
What drowsy birds replied;

He knew the deep sea's voice, its gleams
And tremulous lights afar.
When he lay down at night, in dreams
He tramped from star to star.

ARIANNA
Such shadowy grace I have not seen;
Yet marred a little, and worn keen,
The swart, boy's face.

IPPOLYTA
The dense short hair
Blown back by the damp evening air
Is struck with grey.

ORSOLA
To a hawk belong
Those lean, brown, restless talons strong.

MAFALDA
A dangerous creature, at the last,
As are the lions you keep fast
Down in the courtyard cage: they pace
With that same easy shambling grace.

DUCHESS
His eyes are like a windy sky.

LAODOMIA
And low he speaks, and subtilely,
Though he may say a forthright thing.

ISOTTA
His chance look leaves me shivering.
May he not go? The light is gone.

FIAMMETTA
Fie, sweet! Madonna, I think him one
Whom human passion cannot hold;
For he has tasted love more old —
The strong embrace of the warm earth.

ARIANNA
His soul was free before time's birth,
And dimly that lost freedom yet
Seeks, for it cannot quite forget.

DUCHESS
Dreamers, strange talk! The gathering dark
Creeps in our brains; the wide hushed park
Lies glimmering; whitely, a bough beneath,
Shine lilies; all things hold their breath,
Yet have they something to declare.
Perhaps the silent lute-player
Can tell what lies at evening's heart.
While I demand, walk you apart.

THE SEVEN
Love is a tyrannous lord —
How shall we worship accord?
Welladay!

They go away where the Duke went.

DUCHESS
Is it so good, your wandering way?

PIEPOWDER
Its excellency how shall I say?
Great sorrows and deep joys are rife;
One in the brimming cup of life
Passion with anguish interfuses:
All the wide various world one uses.
In lonely farms where shepherds keep
To lie a night among the sheep;
On the warm-smelling earth, next tide;
A third, the kindly hearth beside
In little towns, or, four-deep, share
The church steps on the city square; —
After the drum in tattered smock,
Bare-head, bare-foot, when children flock,
As their frail hands our finery turn,
And treble voices hum, to learn
Their fleeting griefs; among themselves
What women talk by tens and twelves
Above the nuzzling babe; to know
What tanned men brood on, all the slow
Hot noontide 'neath the berried hedge;
Yea, what the wren says in the sedge,
What the hot thunder calls aloud
When rose-red lightning decks the cloud:
This is the wisdom, this the part
Of dusty-foot and restless-heart.

DUCHESS
Are you not tired?

PIEPOWDER
How should he be
Whose bed is under every tree?

DUCHESS
Nor lone?

PIEPOWDER
He never alien
Who, world-unwearied, returns to men.

DUCHESS
Nor loth to fare companionless?

PIEPOWDER
The stars can counsel and can bless.

DUCHESS
Ah, might I toil and grieve and know,
Facing the noon sun and the snow,
And search out God's imaginings,
And live the life of humble things,
Ah, might I follow the wind's will!

PIEPOWDER
Madonna, just across the hill,
Where the last amber yet lies dark,
Waits the wide world, and calls you — hark!
The sun shall be your comrade staunch,
For your white feet the moon shall blanch
The powdery road, and winds shall tell
A song in speech unutterable.
If your heart speed you straight and right

Come out with me into the night
And learn what life may live the free,
And what, madonna, love may be.

DUCHESS
The mounting twilight lies so thick
My eyes are dizzy, my bosom is quick.
Yet rumour of love's name rings round me —

PIEPOWDER
Is love not of the company?
I heard his wings winnowing the air,
I felt the touch of floating hair —
Ah, come with me the way of love!

DUCHESS
You draw me, as adamant should move.

PIEPOWDER
Breath of the night, on the shimmering tresses
That shroud the Belovèd, shake skyey caresses;
For the fountain once sealed is a brook to meander;
For the ivory tower has unloosed its strong gateway
That love, the late comer, may take his throne straightway;
For the garden enclosed is a pleasaunce to wander
Where August shall lead us afield with her far light;
And through the long season of snowfall and starlight
One shall lie in my breast like a ball of pomander.

DUCHESS
Your voice like the autumnal winds
Troubled my soul, but your face blinds
Eyes which till now had but the sun
To spend their steadfast gazing on.

PIEPOWDER
O heavy-headed gold sunflower,
Perfect exponent of love's power,
Light risen on me, I should be loth
Us two to wrong with slavish oath.
Shall I not see you kind and true
So long as I am dear to you?
And you, too, find my loyalty
Of like date with my constancy?
And may my death's day be that date!
How like you honest wooing, mate?

DUCHESS
Sir, I am yours, and to your say
Subject, but would my master pray,
Since even an hour can work such change
That the old, sloughed-off life looks strange,
Unless he, standing here to-night,
With heart and spirit love me quite
And altogether and utterly,
That straightway he depart from me,
Yea, leave his handmaid here behind.

PIEPOWDER
O comrade after my own mind,
The noble blood runs quick and bright!
Stoop downward from your towering height
Proud spirit poised beyond my reach,
Whom I love past the use of speech,
Even as the tossed sea loves the moon,
As the struck lute the lilting tune,
As the for-wearied traveller, rest.

And this high heart, that shakes your breast
So stormily, is love's celebrant.

DUCHESS
Look you, I am quite ignorant
Of love. The sanguine face on me
Lightened not, I was sick to see.
Men said he walked where my feet strayed;
His splendours ofttimes have affrayed
My tender foolish handmaidens,
And his voice tuned to eloquence
Of high converse even at this noon
A noble spirit; then see, how soon
The long-desired rises in view,
And refluent love is mine, in you.

PIEPOWDER
Be to him, princess, rather than me,
Made over in perpetuity.
Gravely, then, seal the comradeship,
Gentle fellow, give pomp the slip,
And come, through grasses drenched and chill,
By a few stars, across the hill.

VOICES OF THE SEVEN GENTLEWOMEN
Welladay!
How shall our feet know his way?

He lays on the marble seat from which the Duchess has risen, her embroidered mantle, neatly folded, and on it the changing jewel from her brow and her wrought girdle set around with seven precious stones. They go through the park toward the wall of the orchard.

ACT II

The city square. Down a street running into it the Duchess comes to sit on the edge of the fountain; her hair is cropped and curly, in the tight bodice and short skirt of a baladine she looks very slight and small. Piepowder comes in search of her.

DUCHESS

Slant-shuttered windows blink no eye,
Long street and moon-illumined sky
Are bright and empty; the bleared moon
Will peer above the house-fronts soon;
Already 'tis a sickly day.
'Twixt wall and wall runs pavement grey:
The fountain, splashing in the still,
Makes my heart beat like something ill.
What passed? A crouching cat, the clear
Deserted middle square by fear
Debarred, sent skulking three sides round.
Hark! Those are loitering steps. The sound
Rings on the century-trodden stone,
And how the man looks small and lone!
Dear God, is it you?

PIEPOWDER

In what a fright!
You must not run away at night,
Child. You have to sup and sleep. You know
To-morrow again westward we go.

DUCHESS
My friend, suppose I stay behind?

PIEPOWDER
Poor tired small creature, do you find
The highway rougher than once was
Turf crocus-fretted? Courage! The ass
Shall carry you the livelong day.
Vine-wreathed and elm-girt, the swift way
Runs hillward, till blue crests begin
To lift as twilight closes in,
And the moonrise will bring them near.

DUCHESS
O, I am sick of road and gear!
What is a moon when the feet ache,
Or hills to hinder a heart to break?

PIEPOWDER
Grave, this. What ails my gallant heart?

DUCHESS
So ill I fit the player's part;
Unapt for wrangling and for spite.
I danced, you know, sadly to-night,
And the girls laughed, well pleased. They think,
Rightly, I scarce earn meat and drink.

PIEPOWDER
Say, from your beauties' light they shrink.

DUCHESS
And when at evening, over-spent,
We make an inn, the rest, intent
On common good, who dress and lay

The common meal, put me away.
I spoil good food; — I may not sit,
Even, to twirl the tardy spit.

PIEPOWDER
True: soft hands these, for toil unfit.

DUCHESS
For clumsiest groom's work all unable,
Strength lacking even to clean the stable
Or fetch foul water and musty hay
To the rough ass, patient and grey.

PIEPOWDER
That not till I am fast in clay.

DUCHESS
Scorn is the web, and pain the woof.
I am not sullen at reproof,
But I grow dull as I do ill,
And my part of *Parthenophil*
Yourself have blamed, though when rehearsed
It was a pretty thing at first.

PIEPOWDER
Well-grown your brood, though secret nursed.
Yet have you other griefs to show?

DUCHESS
My very dear, I can but go.

PIEPOWDER
Why, troubled-heart, I am sick and sorry

That I marked not, to mend, this worry.
Kissing your hot face weary, I swear
It has done with sawdust and with glare.
For we will turn our backs on men
And learn the hill-wind's word again,
And smell the curling blue wood-smoke
Of dales, and shelter with grim folk
Where nets dry brown along the beach.
In cities loud with outland speech,
Close-barred within whose roadstead lie
Tall masts against a cold green sky,
Shall we not lodge, and taste in these
Odours and rumours of far seas
Filling the narrow streets? And, blown
Into your lap from every zone,
Find jade and topaz; cups of price,
Rock-crystal, brimmed with scent and spice;
Ambers and ivories; broidery, wrought
Seed-pearl on gossamer; or new-caught
Pale Indian apes with pink small paws,
Piteous and docile; blue macaws
Prisoned in gilded wires; or, prime
And spoil of unguessed sunset-clime,
Gay feather-woven cloaks, your sleep
To cover, and — why, child!

DUCHESS

I weep
Being, as just now you rightly said,
Aweary and all uncomforted.

PIEPOWDER

Comfort can you lack whilst I love?

DUCHESS
It is just that my grief is of.

PIEPOWDER
Take then my hoarded offering!
Though my heart be a tameless thing,
And in the long glad years may range,
Yet something is in me will not change
For you, I think, until I die.

DUCHESS
Not yet assuaged the wailful cry
At heart.

PIEPOWDER
Then you grow different.

DUCHESS
I could not, else, know all love meant,
Never! — for hourly knowledge grows:
Thence, love; my breast cannot enclose
All, yet all speech alike is vain.

PIEPOWDER
Alas, beloved, the world-old pain!
For the wind's will is strong desire's,
Boundless and tameless, yet flesh tires,
And sometimes, in the stress, turns just
A piteous handful of blown dust.
And but the soul austerely bent
To find, or do without, content,
Living in ice or else in fire,
Renouncement, or unquenched desire,

Moves unafraid, looking not back,
And free, along the viewless track.

DUCHESS
I cannot follow these high things.
I only know a worm that stings
Evermore, evermore my heart.

PIEPOWDER
Sweet silent comrade, every smart
Is eased in telling.

DUCHESS
I do not know.
Quick, do you love me?

PIEPOWDER
I love you so
That your touch starts and stays my blood,
Your look can rule song's tide in flood;
That absence turns rich summer's height
Into a blanched Saint Lucy's night;
That the thronged world of sound and seeing
Is but your flesh, your breath, your being.

DUCHESS
Yet in all time I shall not tell
The rhythm of your faint pulse's swell;
Nor learn the thoughts, secure and plain
To read, that scurry through your brain.
Passions that throb and lapse in me
Your vision intent shall never see,
Nor your heart taste my sorrow's sharp
Savour; were my deep soul a harp

Under your fingers quivering,
You could not feel nor hear one string.
O, I am cold and very lonely.

PIEPOWDER
I think great spirits, madonna, only,
Have known your pain, and known no cure.
Mortality can but endure.
Yet though man have no anodyne
A counter-passion I divine:
If I can give not to my brother
My life, nor life take of another —
By virtue of that, unalterably
While the soul burn the soul is free.

DUCHESS
Still I am lonely, and still cold.
See, dawn has come and made us old,
Reddened that lamp, and turned the square
Into a horrible ghosts' lair.
I can have courage, and go on
My manifest way, and go alone,
While I could bear no longer, now,
To watch your sleep, not knowing how
Wanders the soul I cannot follow
Through that dream-world where all is hollow.
A strong straight sword-cut should heal well,
And you have a medicinal spell,
And I can nurse my proper wound:
So where the suns go, you are bound.

PIEPOWDER
How can I go? My limbs are weak
With new grief. Though I cannot speak,

With face averse must I get hence,
Steadfast in hard obedience?
If the god utters who shall gainsay?
The wisdom on your lips to-day,
The courage of your princely soul,
Carry you on safe to the goal. . . .
Child, child, I cannot let you go! . . .
Princess, your dog you would not so
Turn off, when he had shared your meat
And slept so long time at your feet!
Across your door to lie like him —

DUCHESS
My strength sickens, the light grows dim,
There is no nice farewell to take.
Nay, even for human kindness' sake,
For love's own, touch me never again,
Lest I turn weak with the dear pain
As of old time, and suck sweet death
Into faint veins with every breath.

PIEPOWDER
Nay, since we love, silence is best.

Piepowder goes back down the street.

DUCHESS
I am so weary I can rest.
Yet ere I sleep, what prayer to say?
Because I sent my love away
For my love's sake, God, from my heart,
Lest it should learn the servile art
To bind a tameless creature, then,
Make me, dear God, forget! Amen.

She sleeps. The square fills up with people and the day goes on.

THE MERCHANTS' CALL

Come buy, white maids, come buy, come buy!
Laces, fans, and broidered gloves,
Ribbons for true-lovers' knots,
Cushions stuffed with down of doves,
Roses' balm distilled, and pots
Brimmed with orient philtery.
Come buy, come buy!

Come buy, tall lads, come buy, come buy!
Damasked stuffs for a pretty neighbour,
Lawn as light as April air,
And the spinning worm's bright labour;
Corals to bind up her hair,
Owches to enchant her eye.
Come buy, come buy!

THE COMEDIANS PASS

Here to-day
And gone to-morrow;
While we stay
A fig for sorrow!
Wine is bright,
A grey eye brighter;
Largess sweet,
A white girl sweeter;
Whom we meet
We clip and greet her:
Heart is light
When purse is lighter,

We who borrow
Never pay,
For to-morrow
Is not to-day.

FROM THE CHURCH A LITANY
For long years of aspiration,
For high strength of concentration,
For calm age's contemplation,
Non nobis, Domine.

For the end of peaceful days,
For the coffin crowned with bays,
For the after-comers' praise,
Non nobis, Domine.

Saviour, by thy dear-bought power,
Under which fallen spirits cower,
Keep us at the mortal hour,
Non nobis, Domine —

From the hungry worm's desires,
From the lust that never tires,
From the sharp, mysterious fires —
Non nobis, Domine!

The ducal party passes, from hunting. Three spinners, on the fountain steps, gossip as the spindle twirls.

MICAËLA
The hunt comes empty-handed home.

EVA
Yet the good horses sweated.

MICAËLA

Some
Did not uncouple, I think, at all;
Trimly step out the huntsmen tall.
That foremost brace of greyhounds lean
In the scarlet leash — their paws are clean.

EVA

The hawks sit, sulky, on their frame,
The Duke —

MADDALENA

As sulky, twice as tame;
Yet the old bright splendour flashes still.

MICAËLA

Never the same since she fell ill,
Our lady, sweet Lionella.

MADDALENA

Tutt — !

EVA

She is his uncle's child.

MADDALENA

Aye, but — !
I mind the christening — dukes pell-mell!
Dear Christ, he loved her mother well!

EVA

As our duke loves this sunnier head.

MICAËLA
Abundant time they have had to wed,
Being affianced how long since
The lifetime of our late brave prince!
Some lack of love must somewhere be.

MADDALENA
Of this remediless malady
She sickened a great while ago.

EVA
Nay, not so long, neighbour, not so!

MADDALENA
Will you the whole tale I relate?
I have it from inside the great
Shut palace where she darkened lies.
'Twas one of countless fantasies
Her waiting gentlewomen should
Be seven in number, wise as good,
And chaste as witty, by a word
Called from the stars.

EVA
Pleiads?

MICAËLA I heard
That sisterhood was one time seven,
But six walk now the wintry heaven:
One fell.

MADDALENA
And of the princess' band
— Who loved like sisters, understand —
One loved outside the ring, and fell.

EVA
Which one?

MADDALENA
Nay, I — I cannot tell:
One told me not. But she so grieved
For her of whom was heaven bereaved
Heart-stricken she sank, and, laid abed,
She sleeps there like one newly dead,
And scarcely swallows, and cannot speak,
And 'twixt the linen and her cheek
Is no more difference, than show
The white narcissus-cups on snow.
And you may mark in April weather
When the six ladies walk together,
How they go veiled, as mourning her
That fled, and her that cannot stir
Outside her one-time pleasure-palace.

MICAËLA
They go like doves, so void of malice
Their meek distress, that her their shame
As if among them still, they name.

EVA
Methinks not always cloistered they,
For sometimes by the hilly way
That runs above the park, I have crossed,
Where, deep retired, in boskage lost
And in the dusk of twilight air,
I have seen Ippolyta's black hair.

MADDALENA
Aye, they come forth; for I espied
At mass last week, half turned aside,

Grave Arianna's slender throat
Mid the court folk. I took no note,
Not looking for her out of door.

EVA
When last old rose-hued moon swung o'er
The dawning world, I woke and went
To pick cool mushrooms, dew-besprent,
From the oozy meadow; in startled view,
A girl, gathering hoary dew
To fill a vial ere the sun rise,
Lifted Laodomia's strange green eyes
Like precious stones men singing praise.

MICAËLA
An hour since, in this market-place
I knew a creature slight; it turned;
Fiammetta's rose-pale beauty burned
Through her white veil like flames through glass.

MADDALENA
And where the Eastern merchant was
I have watched Orsola's long white hands
Fingering the stuffs from Indian lands.

EVA
Will you not laugh, or think I dream,
If I say on? I sought the stream
One amethyst noon, beyond the hill,
For the heat's sake, to bathe in still
Cool water, and as I lay along
Hearing its limpid under-song,
Screened by thick grasses, some one came

To dip slim hands. I lay for shame
Couched, seeing a silken petticoat.
A white web, wind-blown, chanced to float
My way, a little murmuring cry
Pursued it, then a splash close by,
A white arm reaching, and through the boughs
I saw Isotta's pencilled brows.
"It is wet," I cried, "but safely here."
She was sped thence, like a brown deer
That feeds on lilies in a lake.
I keep the white thing for her sake.

MADDALENA
Where the dames drag their purfled dress
Along the wrought stone terraces,
I watch them evenings through the grate.
And one I have remarked of late
Nearer the gates, to shun the rest,
And known Mafalda's grieving breast.

MICAËLA
Have we not named the seven names o'er
Although one girl is here no more?
There is enchantment in this thing.

MADDALENA
No ill could soil our lady's wing;
It is white magic if 'tis aught.

EVA
I shall not tire myself with thought
About great folk who are not as we.
The shadows all are shrunken; see,
One lies here sleep-sequestered still.

MADDALENA
Such sleep as poppy-heads distil.

MICAËLA
Let her sleep on, poor lass.

EVA
I fear
Her mates stole off and left her here:
I will come back for her ere night.

MADDALENA
Come now; the pavement waves with light.

MICAËLA
Touch her. She does not wake, yet yields;
So men sleep, after stricken fields.

MADDALENA
So women, when their hearts are eased.

EVA
Babes, too, that sob and are appeased.

Noon goes over the silent square. Then the Duchess stirs and rises.

DUCHESS
I dreamed I lost the fervid stone
Upon my brow that binds my hair;
I dreamed I lost the gold-wrought zone

Bossed with clear jewels, high ladies wear;
And, outcast from my maiden throne,
Left my furred robe I knew not where.
What idle pain a dream may cost,
To think that pride and place were lost!
Mafalda, Isotta, Orsola,
Fiammetta and Ippolyta,
Arianna, Laodomia!
I thought to tell my handmaidens
A strange dream, but they lie far hence,
Cool in white tissue of distant looms,
In marble-paven and arras'd rooms.
Sharp, breathless light brims up the square,
Rose-red houses beat back fierce air,
But the high fountain-basin flings
Upward in brilliant waverings
A slender shaft; the crystal breaks;
While the white pillar turns and shakes
Drops tinkle and fall; softly they drip
To dim stone tank from brazen lip.
I have slept well. Where shall I turn,
Where moons strike not nor suns do burn? . . .
I have, I think, a sleepy will. . . .
What music comes so sweet and shrill?
What is that little rustling sound
Like dead leaves hurried along the ground
By autumn winds or through the street
Harried in droves? Lo, tiny feet
Toiling and pressing, an anxious stream
Of silky goats comes — white as cream,
Brown as a moth, or tanned and shaggèd;
This has a curled horn, that is raggèd.

The shepherd follows his goats, his pipe at his lips to resume the tune; he pauses on seeing the Duchess. The goats push up to the fountain and he helps them drink from the conduit below, but blindly; having drunk, the little creatures lie down in such thin lines of shade as they can find, all along under the wall of the church.

SHEPHERD

Her face is the moonlit air,
Her touch is the cold sea foam;
I have not kissed her cloudy hair,
Nor seen quick tears her eyelids brighten;
But when the sun has changed his lair
And the last pilgrim-bird is home,
Shall I not know how she is fair,
While the warm dark shall laugh and lighten?

DUCHESS

What make you, shepherd, here? More sweet
Your upland pastures, screened from heat
By chestnuts, and your calm employs.

SHEPHERD

O hush not yet that singing voice!
O let those emeralds, as in dreams
I have prayed, bend on me their beams
Spirit-enkindling, yet a while!
And let that slow mysterious smile
Inscrutable, just curve the cheek,
The lids just narrow, as if you seek
Waters that run deep under ground
Or gems rock-bosomed. I have found

In the dim woods' most silent seat
Where noonday dew has splashed my feet,
Buds and leaves fallen as you passed through.
You are a witch-lady, are not you?
Or are you, as the priests complain,
After your exile come again,
One of the great lost goddesses,
Vineyard and tilth to touch and bless
In August, and the orchard croft
In March? I have hung you garlands oft
Of purple clover and silvery thyme,
And sere oak-boughs in fall, with rime
O'er-whitened, wreaths in spring-time shed,
Of the rathe cyclamen's troubled red
Fashioned, to win your grace for men.
Are you in very presence, then,
The mighty Mother, care-beguiled,
Or are, indeed, her ravished child,
The wedded maid, come back to share
For the sweet season, the warm, swift air,
And the remembered light of flowers?

DUCHESS
What, did I climb, these drowsy hours,
The dark road, thronged with shadows grey,
From the faint under-world away
Into large daylight and the breath
Of life that never questioneth?
Your eyelids beat, lad!

SHEPHERD
O, benign
Lighten on me, Monna Proserpine!

DUCHESS
I am no divine thing, but a girl.

SHEPHERD
You set my sun-steeped brain awhirl!
Then I may kiss, maybe, your feet,
And, without anger, hands so sweet
My reverent lips do wrong them? Bear
I pray with patience, unaware
If I am clumsy and amiss;
I have had but hyacinths to kiss,
And brown soft cubs, and the quick breasts
That quiver in squirrels' holes, and nests
Of bright-eyed friendly singing-birds.
Look you, I have not any words,
My poor throat cannot even sing.
Only my arms, that quicken and cling
Around you, strong and fast enlaced,
While I kneel here, hold you embraced.
Speak not now, stir not, only smile.
You are a spray-dashed, flower-flecked isle,
And I the circling mountain brook.
There is a kindness in your look
That veils its lightning: let me cool
My forehead in your pitiful
Soft hands, or touch your fragrant dress
To ease my bosom's new distress.

DUCHESS
A delicate lord is love, wooing of voice,
Mild-eyed and subtle-spoken;
But sanguine-hearted, sleepless: for his toys
Tossing men's hearts till broken.

While in his footprint set
I found his aspect sweet;
Now I would fain forget
Where trod his charmèd feet.

SHEPHERD
White throat that exquisitely throbs,
Even your music some grace robs
From the pure curve; your cheek's thin line
Is as the jonquil's chalice fine.
And all your honey-coloured hair
Is warm and live, its curls ensnare
The sun, a nest of spiceries.
Though the curved lashes veil your eyes,
Large, bright, below, a slow tear slips.
The music burns between your lips:
Like a fruit smelling of the south,
Like a pomegranate is your mouth,
I hunger and fear to taste thereof
Lest I die. Lo you, this is love! . . .
My pipe, where is it? Sweet flock, awake!
Green waits your pasture by the lake.
Creature benign, come home with these
To where, beneath dense chestnut trees,
Girt in by wattled cotes for sheep,
The rough, wise dogs shall guard your sleep.
You are not loth to climb the pass?
So thick the pines, so tall the grass,
That men come never from below.

DUCHESS
Shepherd, I am content to go.
I think all voices there will cease,
And but one name be worshipped — peace.

They go out. The market begins again.

THE MERCHANTS IMPORTUNATE

Come buy, sweethearts, come buy, come buy!
Here be dainties sold by measure,
Eyes' delight and passion's treasure,
Youth is taken in change for pleasure.
Come buy of us, come buy!

Come buy, good sir; bright dame, come buy!
Why ere nightfall be a sleeper?
Goods are tarnished but are cheaper;
Feed flesh full, earth soon shall keep her!
Come buy at last, come buy!

A CANDLE-LIGHT HYMN

Lord, we have wrought and praised thee since red morn,
And now the sun goes down:
The burthen and the day's long heat are borne,
Lights quicken through the town.
Thick in the quiet air soft shadows creep,
Swift darkness is anear;
O Sun of Righteousness, lighten our sleep,
And keep our hearts from fear!

The spinners return in the late twilight.

MADDALENA

I wish the sleeper that is gone
Find nothing harder than a stone
To lay her tired gold head upon.

EVA
Man's days are a child's feverish dreams
Who in the market sleeps, and deems
That the sole real, which only seems.

MICAËLA
Hither she strayed out of the night,
She went hence into deep twilight,
Yet her feet lead her safe and right.

They spin in silence. Piepowder comes back, walking and calling softly through the dark.

PIEPOWDER
Is she here? Lionella, stay,
For I have given my soul away
And I must have it back or die.
Up through the mountains toward the sky
I climbed, where dark-leaved ilexes
Straggle and dwindle and lastly cease,
Firs and great rocks stand lonely: there,
In the white noon-tide's tenuous air,
Supine upon the slippery brown
Warm earth and odorous, I flung down
To see the sun blaze through the pine;
But the sun was a tavern sign,
The earth a great house masterless,
The very sky, that leans to bless,
Prisoned me in its brazen dome;
The jade-green, arrowy torrent's foam
Frothed lifeless underneath the fall
As tired mimes toss the heavy ball.
The mountain had no word, in fine.
I left the dizzying sunshine,

Dropping, in oak-wood glades concealed,
Down to a hidden grassy field
With fragrant limes and poplars set,
Whose twinkling leaves, in ceaseless fret,
Lisp into pleasant rainy noises.
The clamorous thicket's fiery voices
All noon-day try the night-song o'er;
Untouched, wide gossameres sparkle hoar
Even till mid-morning, while the thrush
Unfrighted, from a swaying bush
Rolls her clear descant rich and shrill;
Violet and gilded daffodil
Border the meadow forestward.
Once more I found the sense turned hard.
So, being heavy, I fell asleep.
I stood where clouds trailed o'er a steep
Grey, sullen, trembling waste of sea:
A strong grey wind blew ceaselessly
Across it on me; at either hand
Ran the long beach's printless sand,
And the sounds strove of wind and sea;
But the vast had no voice for me.
I woke — blue twilight's filmy eyes
Were empty, and the darkening skies
Paper pricked over with a pin
By a foolish hand. It was my sin
To love one girl more than all earth:
I, that was wanderer from my birth,
My love being lost, am sick at soul;
Where grows the herb shall make me whole?

Eva
Who in the shadow walks unseen?

PIEPOWDER
My mother called me Peregrin',
But in a far sea-isle, whose mart
Was thronged with blue-eyed sailors swart,
They named me Master Piepowder.

MADDALENA
Why, furtive, scan the empty square,
Messer Piepowder, in thickening light?

PIEPOWDER
Before the brown dusk blackened quite
I hoped by whistle and by lure
A restless eaglet to secure
That took flight, startled, from my wrist.

EVA
Your chance, good subtle-tongue, is missed:
A longsome while may be to wait.

Beneath my mother's eyes I span,
Or broidered, set apart:
I left her for a roving man
To sleep upon his heart.
But some come early, some come late,
Where all at last must be;
And now I wait inside hell's gate
Till he shall lie by me.

PIEPOWDER
A wind storms up from the city gate,
Fanning the wretched straws about
As soldiers hunt a peasant rout.

MICAËLA
Tell me your loss apart, fair youth.

PIEPOWDER
A beryl, an amulet in truth,
From my neck; hereabouts it lies.

MICAËLA
No search till the aging moon shall rise.

Three queens in the tower are spinning a thread,
Over their laps it lies tangled and red.

In the choking white sea-fog the stones drip with rime,
And hushed is the bell that rang vespers and prime.

— Is it finished? My fingers are wrinkled with cold;
We were spinning so long we must be very old.

— A lock of the fine scarlet wool is unspent;
But the vair on our bosoms is faded and rent.

Strong from the void mounts the cry of the tide,
While never sweet airs blow the cold mist aside.

— The sun is dead, sister; it darkens to night,
And how shall we measure the thread without light?

Our lamps at the stair-foot were left long ago,
But we are too feeble to venture below.

PIEPOWDER
The air, though pale with hope of light,
Is colder than a mountain height.

MADDALENA
The others spin, and with shut breast
Review their stored-up thoughts. No jest: —
Your errand in my ear: stoop lower!

PIEPOWDER
My bosom bore a gold sunflower,
Good dame; though lost, the flower august
Must not wither here in the dust.

MADDALENA
A flower can bloom a single day:
Man has a single life, they say.

The Christmas child is blithe and douce,
The Pasque-child makes a holy house.
St. John's can hear the fairy talk,
All Hallows' with the dead can walk.
But never honest girl was born
Upon a dark Good Friday morn.

PIEPOWDER
Gossips, I know not what you be,
But, 'faith, you sing not cheerfully.
To sit and spin, how should you know
God's birds alight and walk below,
And oft with plumes unsinged, and dress
Unscorched, love treads in furnaces?
Yon windows show a silver streak,
When the moon tops the first house-peak
I must be breathing country air.

MADDALENA
Gossip, the player is debonair.

PIEPOWDER
'Give you good even, and better tunes.

EVA
May dewy coolness charm your noons —

MADDALENA
Stars show by day —

MICAËLA
And nights be light.

THE THREE SPINNERS
Messer Piepowder, a kind good-night.

They go, still spinning, along the dark street.

PIEPOWDER
The high heart shall not stoop to ill;
Faith can outdare old women's lore,
Bitter prove cure for sore.
She has her proud life lonely to fulfil
And I must urge my way and purge my will.

The ardent quiet of the strong
Is to the winds and waters dear,
For spirits still and clear
Only, can mirror steadily and long
The mountains and the uncounted starry throng.

ACT III

Among the mountains. The Duchess at the door of a hut, waiting under a vine-trellis hung with purple bunches; the shepherd's pipe is heard as the shepherd comes home.

DUCHESS

The pale, still, autumn-tasting air
Is all too thin and cool to upbear
Those fluttering notes, that flag and waver,
With many a trill and plaintive quaver
Lingering out the wistful strain.
So, you come back to me again,
Dear heart and goodly, to whom each hour
My bosom turned, as the sunflower
Fast rooted, through diminished gyres
Follows Hyperion's splendid fires.
At even, my breast becomes the sea
Where that sun sinks triumphantly
Empurpling its pure hyaline.

SHEPHERD

Your mouth, like honeyed eglantine,
Sweetest heart, all day thirsted for,
I taste, and thirst for it the more:
Then touch each quivering eyelid thin,
Shutting the moony glimmer in:
Your tender hand, that clings and tightens:
Lastly, your throat, that dusks and whitens,
Through all its firm, pale, slender length,

From sharp chin's grace to shoulder's strength
Sweeter than dappled sycamore.

DUCHESS
Ruddy curls, bronzed and burnished o'er,
The sun and wind that in you played
Together, have left you disarrayed
With memories of the pine forest.

SHEPHERD
Linger a moment on my breast.
Your pale red lips are tremulous fire,
I am the phœnix' unpriced pyre,
I the lone bird aërial.
As, for the nobler grape in fall,
The sun, now pausing on the line,
Turns all his being into wine,
Your lip's touch is the lustral rite
Transmuting mine to essence bright,
Till from your mouth's high sacrament
I mount all spirit.

DUCHESS
With strength unspent,
Brown arms that close, ye hold me fast
Where time knows neither first nor last,
Yea, in God's fire-girt paradise. . . .
Even while we touch it, yonder flies
The moment, far already away.
Tell me, how passed the slow sweet day?

SHEPHERD
The soft sheep cropped a lawny shore,
In face of where the torrent hoar

Down the rock-wall of its own weight
A dangling skein drops fine and straight.
To-night I could not hear its rush,
The air sets thither; yet in the hush
Through the deep reeds that fringe the lake
I heard the long pale ripples break
With a low, ceaseless, lapping noise.

DUCHESS
Came there not any wandering boys
Up the stream's bed, intent to find
Green-bearded filberts, or behind
The pinfold, chestnuts glossy brown?
Or a strayed hunter, scrambling down
The barren-ridgèd mountain-crest?
Or pilgrim in his earth-grey vest?

SHEPHERD
I saw none such; who should there be?

DUCHESS
Who should come hither, verily?

SHEPHERD
Why question of so unlike a thing?

DUCHESS
Because the air has seemed to sing
All day. A far-off lute-player
I thought — but 'twas a kind of purr
O' the blood; the ear dreamed, as the eye
Sees the world reel in mid-July.
Still sit, amidst this leafy green,

And pause, the little words between,
To touch your reed-stops fitfully,
Till a beam climbs the cypress tree
Rusty, to gild its tawny peak.

SHEPHERD
Your strong white kid was far to seek
At noon; those hoofs, like agate blocks
Polished and streaked, among sharp rocks
They danced on upward, who so gay?
He paused to pasture on the way,
Glancing bright looks, the slender head
Lifting each instant as he fed,
And ever in pretended fear
Leaping steep shelves as I drew near,
Till I must fetch a half mile round
And come on him from higher ground.
He will dance some day to the wolf's den.

DUCHESS
I will smoke out the grim wolf then,
And save my wanton wanderer.
Pallid gold of the windless air
Blazons summer's accomplished time.
Sing, my dear heart, and when the rhyme
Pauses and turns with iterant passion,
As is our comely country fashion,
I will awake my harsher throat
To answer on another note.

SHEPHERD
Sweetheart, when you are old and small and grey,
And your dear voice is but a rustling sound,

And in the sun or by the fire all day
You spin and tell of me to girls around,
Tell of me only how I loved you so
That my days breathed away like April snow;
Tell of me to no bold girl or her lover,
But in your deep heart murmur my name over.

DUCHESS
Now we love: who knows age, alas?

When you do pipe, beloved, I shut my eyes
And think I hear the brook's voice and the wind,
And when you sing, I know in Paradise
One bird had such a note before Eve sinned:
But when you sing and hold me, next December,
I wonder, shall I all spring's sweets remember?
Ah, sing and clasp me, for I wonder yet
If Eve remembered; if you will forget!

Hold me close, ere the good hour pass.

SHEPHERD
A white moth flits beneath the trees
Whose crests are hushed with mysteries,
While all the sward is barred and quaint
With radiance cool and shadow faint.
What filled your lonely hours of sun?

DUCHESS
I took my tufted distaff, dun
With carded hemp, down the thick wood
Of gnarly ilex dark; and stood
Where through the blue air crystalline

I saw old cities, hill-set, shine,
Dark-walled, slim-towered, against the sun;
But white-crowned flashed to southward one
Ringed with red walls; and from the plain,
Thin as the tinkle of sun-smit rain,
The Angelus bell I heard, and thought
How love is all and we are nought.
Then I dreamed, right in purple noon,
That music, like the cradle tune
My mother might have stilled me by,
Though ere the moon that in the sky
Signed my birth, dwindled and was gone,
She was asleep and under stone.

SHEPHERD
This was a dream, foolish sweet creature,
Magic to make from things of nature.
I know right well your Angelus-spell.
It was the silver-tempered bell
From the brown church's tower, that, set
Upon our mighty flanks, is yet
Hid by a spur from all our pass:
There where you have heard your Christmas mass,
And borne pink lilies, Lady-Day.

DUCHESS
Happen it did, then, as you say,
I think 'twas nothing, for my part.
But woke and echoed in my heart
Forgotten dreams: one evening
After a long day's journeying,
When I climbed up to such a town;
The grass was tall and green; a brown
Fine dust was under-foot, and soft;

Rose-red, the city hung aloft;
Sparse olives, silver-leafed and frail,
Tinged the declining sunlight pale
But cast no shade. The road swung on
In wide loops, narrowing sharp; upon
The level last, hard by the gate
— For it was there we had to wait
While a rude soldier munched his bread —
I saw, to all the eastward spread,
Like the waves' waste in form and hue,
Innumerous, tossing vast and blue,
A tumbled sea of hills, all kissed
By lights enmeshed of amethyst.
These are these mountains magical;
I dwell, enchanted, amidst them all.

Piepowder, out of sight, sings the song of the three queens, the lute continuing to sound through the trees as he moves entangled among the sheep-cotes.

DUCHESS
Listen!

SHEPHERD
How late a traveller!

DUCHESS
Did you not hear the falcon stir
His bells?

SHEPHERD
And a dog whines thereby.

DUCHESS
Listen! He ruffles drowsily
His downy bosom's changing sheen.

SHEPHERD
Aye, something has roused our peregrine.
In the dusk wind the trees begin
To talk together; let us go in.
Your hand is cold as a snow-wreath.

DUCHESS
Look how the darkness lies beneath
The boughs, and still its tide mounts higher,
Starward.

SHEPHERD
You shiver. You shall have fire, —
See, the first fire of the late year.
A week ago I ranged it here
With cedarn boughs and cinnamon
And odorous gums from lands all sun,
That you might kindle at our door
On the wind-haunted threshing-floor
The very fire should scare off harm
Through the long rainy nights, while warm
We are singing spring to us.

DUCHESS
Not to-night.
The south blows warm.

SHEPHERD
This coal is alight;
Look, as I blow the filmy ashes
The rose-breast of it wanes and flashes.
Touch but these leaves before we sing
The autumnal hymn of fire-lighting.
The wavering flame that creeps and hides

Licks round the logs, veers and subsides,
Then roaring leaps to flicker and curl
As though a world-rose should unfurl,
Or, in an airy jet, aspire
Topaz, ruby, sharp sapphire,
The accumulated treasuries all
Of palaces ethereal.
Poised like a living thing, it breathes,
Laughs, and flings from its supple wreaths
In hot triumphant mockery
Spark-showers toward the eclipsèd sky.
Sweet, take this bough with flames abloom
And wake the hearth-fire in the room.
Still listless? Then my arm about you
Does what I shall not do without you.
The faggots crackle and hiss, unbound,
And the warm light wavy, a gold embrowned,
Plays through the shut-in, kindly place.
Once more grow nights dearer than days.
While the sap shrieks, the blue flames spring,
Against my shoulder lean and sing.

DUCHESS
What you have done I cannot stay.
The stars have marched, which met to-day,
Since on their road God set them first.
Sing you. I cannot if I durst.

SHEPHERD
O presence holy
Of divine unrest,
Virginal, lowly,
To thine unmemoried breast

With faith secure
The world's rejections
Kindly thou takest,
Man's best perfections
Only thou makest
Utterly clean and pure. . . .

DUCHESS
Hark, the dogs! Knocking at the door!
Yet still I will not cross the floor
Nor lift the latch to summoning fate.

SHEPHERD
What, you are feverous! It is late:
The wandering voice we heard — I come! —
Would ask the road or beg a crumb.
Your brow and palm are moist and cool.
Cling not, dear heart; take you that stool
Screened in the chimney corner dim,
For I must open indeed to him.
The dogs are waking: Silver, Tray,
List how they clamour, Blanche and Stray!

PIEPOWDER
A good night, friends; your mountain is high.
Have you clean straw for such as I,
A loaf's end, and, from shaggy-shanks,
A cup of milk? For meed, my thanks;
Then, ere we sleep, at tune and song
A match, so it were not too long.

SHEPHERD
In a good hour for us you came.
Will you not sit and watch the flame?

PIEPOWDER
I thought to have crossed the pass to-night
But found it in the owlet light
Dangerous. Your bale-fire drew me back,
When I had lost the plainer track
And among sheep-cotes groped astray,
To lie by it content till day:
Then, as beneath your door I spied
Flames' changeful light, and heard inside
Singing, hard on a softer tone —
But your companion is gone.

SHEPHERD
Sir, eye not so these empty bowls;
A pipkin simmers on the coals
Within there, which we must await.

PIEPOWDER
Kind sylvan folk, to come so late
Is not to earn so large a share
Of shepherd's peace and shepherd's fare.
Three queens in the tower are spinning a thread.

SHEPHERD
Is it lute, voice, or song, or all,
Has that ambiguous, haunting fall,
Like an old nurse's lullaby
To a child born too sad to cry?

PIEPOWDER
I learned it long since, as I think,
From three strange spinners, by the brink

Of a town fountain. Sharp folk they,
But kindly, with wise words to say
To whoso neither fawns nor fears.

SHEPHERD
Learned they their wisdom from the years?

PIEPOWDER
Each, rather, from her bosom deep.
Eva's was moulded so to keep
A tired child warm: childlike her thought.
But Maddalena's lore was bought:
Her eyes have lost their languishment,
And round the shrunk shape, shaken and bent,
Softer than ermine, hangs her hair.

SHEPHERD
What is the other who spins there?

PIEPOWDER
In her aspect two habits stand, —
Virginity, and long command,
As who an abbess should have been.

The Duchess passes to go out under the vine-trellis.

SHEPHERD
Where goes my love? What has she seen?

DUCHESS
Nothing. The night is hushed and dark,
Dew patters from the branches stark.

I would fain taste the silent air
Dark, cool as is deep well-water.

SHEPHERD
They talk of many things, no doubt,
Down in the cities all about?

PIEPOWDER
Aye, of themselves, then of the court, —
Each other's sins duly report.

SHEPHERD
I saw the Duke once. I am told
That since his wife died, he grows old.

PIEPOWDER
The Duke was never married — nay;
Madonna Lionella lives; men say
She sickened in her palace fair
And trancèd lies, love-havened, there.

SHEPHERD
Yet I remember how it was said
When the great Duke died, this should wed
His child, who no way else might take
The realm that for her mother's sake
Whom he so loved, he would have for hers.

PIEPOWDER
That intent, common talk avers;
But though his dying wish was sore
His child was not delivered o'er
Loveless, unloved, to wedlock strait:
The royal bird must choose, to mate.

SHEPHERD
Does the Duke love her, so to pine?

PIEPOWDER
I think he loved, by a sure sign,
That never pledge nor promise lay
Betwixt them, till that sorry day
Which cost men's eyes their Duchess' face,
And cost the Duke all life's dear grace.
Yet may it be lies, all said of her.

SHEPHERD
Please you to sup, good wayfarer?
Seethed with all spices, here is kid,
White bread, cream by the cool wave hid
All noontide, dark in earthen crock,
Where wind-swept grasses ripple and rock.
And here are grapes of silvery green
With sunrise flushed, the bloomy sheen
Of others globèd purple; and sweet,
Cold, and a little crisp to eat,
Tender figs, dun and violet,
Pearled over with night's freshness yet;
Firm curd-balls snowy, and last, a few
Green, velvet almonds, milky-new.
Dainties more rare we lack; here not
Flushed peach, nor freckled bergamot,
Nor vermeil pomegranate, alas!
Such ripen not thus far up the pass.

PIEPOWDER
Than Salomon we are more blest;
His supper Balkis never dressed,

Nor yet the black-browed Shulamite:
But does our hostess fast to-night?

DUCHESS
I have drunken milk: I want no more.

SHEPHERD
Is no wine, sweetheart, in our store?
The unfrequent guest more worthily
To honour, let us merry be.

PIEPOWDER
Great-bellied flasks, that nought may lack,
Be here.

SHEPHERD
This, Roman tongue calls black
But we up here, red wine; beside
Sits pale, sweet, sleepy, amber-eyed
Vintage of Orvieto, whose Dome
Gilds the rich clusters round its home.

PIEPOWDER
Still do you taste neither of these?

SHEPHERD
She is half-way a Sienese.
Those hold, the best of country wine
Is that warm, darker brewage fine
That in the vats leaps hot and red
By Montepulciano's head.

PIEPOWDER
Men have strange customs over-sea.
One kind takes pleasure curiously
When the wine lightens in the glass,
To name kind dame or winsome lass,
And in her honour to drink about
As Romans poured libation out.
Stately, grave, scarce-seen shepherdess,
I drink your health in humbleness.

DUCHESS
Though, wanderer, I may not pay
Your courtesy in the same way,
Because to-night I fast, your grace
Will let my thanks supply the place.

SHEPHERD
You are a lute-player, I see,
The oaten pipe suits best with me.
Yet, not unmindful whom you follow,
Nor how the cruel bright Apollo
Once served poor fluting Marsyas,
While, hidden in the ripe, tall grass,
Old, kind Pan heard heaven's clear notes
And limped back sorrowful to his goats,
Furry brown fauns, white Dryades,
Weeping, obscure among the trees: —
I am still for trial, as you invited.
Our prize shall be of gold hair plighted,
A bracelet, woven from a soft tress
While we sing, by this shepherdess.
And as she plaits the subtle braid
She shall pronounce a judgment weighed.

PIEPOWDER
Agreed, but little does it fit
In the deep chimney-shade she sit.

SHEPHERD
Yet lies the fire-light on her hands.

PIEPOWDER
They play among the golden strands
Like doves in the Hesperian tree.
So, since the essay took start from me,
Set you the pace, Arcadian.

SHEPHERD
Mistress, when you weary grow
Of your royal giving,
Have no fear for me, that know
But one good in living.

Speak sad words without a frown,
Then, untouched of sorrow,
Kiss my heavy eyelids down;
They will not wake to-morrow.

PIEPOWDER
Now I halt after, if I can.

— Whither, stripling, runs your way
Into deepening night?
— Sweet, I follow hard on day,
Overtaking light.

— Dusty-foot, the wind is chill
In the trees above.

— Harbour lies where, past the hill,
Eddying marsh-lights move.

— Thick-set stars will mock your pain,
Until dawning rest.
— That desire which men call vain,
Is of all things best.

DUCHESS
If sweeter basil be, or rue,
Is a point, who may answer to?
The hollow lute awake again.
And teach your oat a soother strain.

SHEPHERD
I know no descant; all my skill
Leaves me at forthright plain-song still.

PIEPOWDER
Love me to-day, while roses are falling,
And faint from the cypresses birds are a-calling,
For the rose will be past, the song be forgotten,
And this eager flesh dust ere a green tree be rotten.
Love me to-day ere the passion pass over
And the dead love's perfume be forgot of the lover;
Love me while pleasure is fragrant and warm,
For love like a bird can outsoar the swift storm,
And to-day, though arms slacken and fevered lips tire,
Love is singing aloft in the seraphim-quire.

SHEPHERD
I cannot counter to such art,
To hush the breath, and stir the heart:
Take you the bright hairs implicate.

How should I grudge a flower to fate
When the whole rose-garden is mine?

DUCHESS
Let loose my hand, your arm untwine!
Nay, I was well whereas I was.

PIEPOWDER
How the old images repass!
Say, deftest weaver of bright things,
Have you no cunning with the strings?
I did not think God had graced two
Women's small heads with this self hue, —
Gold honey-coloured; so soft its weight,
So rich its sweets inviolate,
So live it curls and stirs, awaking
The ancient wound to set that aching!

DUCHESS
You give me, God, a grievous part,
But I must do what bids my heart,
I cannot else. The lute, then, friend!
Long since I had some skill to bend
Less sunburnt fingers on the frets.
Is it so — and so? How one forgets!

Welladay!
Love is a tyrannous lord,
How shall I worship accord,
Or set my feet in his way?

PIEPOWDER
O heart superb, are you found here?
O littlest comrade and most dear;

Close, hand, on mine; gird up, slight form,
To dare the sun-shower and the storm,
To ford the loud stream, swim the deep,
And by the roadside fire to sleep.
To watch the horizon's hill-cloven rim
As we mount upward, upward swim
All round us, till we pluck the rose
That loves the silence of the snows.
Shall we not go at birds' first stir?

DUCHESS
You forget, Messer Piepowder.

PIEPOWDER
I had forgot. Shepherd, your grace;
My brain was dizzy for a space.
Yet we may sit here the night through
And talk across the fire as do
All old friends? When the last cocks crow
I will take up my lute and go.
You are the master, you give leave?

SHEPHERD
Stay ever, if so she will not grieve.
She is my blood, my breath; what should,
Save her desire, become my good?

DUCHESS
An hour long, or a life long, stay!
When you go, goes my heart away.
You breathe the unknown of dreams: your eyes
Lighten through time's immensities.

PIEPOWDER
And woofèd songs of sorrowful laughter,
And sound of dead feet following after,
I waken.

DUCHESS
In enchantment deep
Long laid, my spirit shakes off her sleep,
And plumes her mighty wings, and light
Poises herself for sunward flight.
Her pinions rustle and unfurl.

PIEPOWDER
There spoke again my radiant girl.

DUCHESS
O long-beloved, O kind and dear,
How can I thus depart? Yet hear
The quiring call from peak to peak,
The way of love is still to seek;
And my heart owns the skyey spell,
The secret incommunicable,
Therefore I go whilst you abide.

SHEPHERD
So — may I speak now? I have tried
Listening the spoken word, to know
The unsaid things you uttered so.
Your noble nature shrinks to wound
Mortally, something helpless found
And leave it in the dark to moan.
But you being gone, I am not alone;
For all the hours of all our days

Sit by me, company my ways;
The peace of hopes once satisfied,
Pride of possession — O never pride
Had such rich banquet as affords
My store, of memory's unsunned hoards!
I shall want long to tell them all.
Always I knew this must befall;
How should a wordless creature, mute
As powers that swell the flowers and fruit,
Fit but to watch the woolly herd,
How should I mew a strong-winged bird?
In your august and splendid soul
Never could such fill up the whole,
Or such supply your high heart's food.
Therefore, in full glad gratitude,
O only love and stainless sweet,
Let me a last time kiss your feet
That they not weary nor be cold!

DUCHESS
There is a doctrine old,
There is a rule austere.
Passing I have no fear
Although the road is paved with pain:
To want is more than to attain.
I go in humble reverence
Even by your teaching, shepherd, hence,
Leaving you, in exchange, a token;
God's love breaks not as mine has broken.
Wayfarer, on the open road
Your tireless strength shall know no load,
Companioned by your singing heart.
My soul and I must dwell apart:

We have to learn, being all untaught,
The miracles by silence wrought,
And by the solitude that lies
Inside the bosom.

PIEPOWDER
You are more wise
Than aught quite mortal, and me, a fool,
You have sent back to bitter school.

DUCHESS
No bitterness shall tinge, I know,
Messer Piepowder, your dusky glow.

PIEPOWDER
You cannot go out in night alone.

SHEPHERD
Nor, solitary, try ways unknown.

DUCHESS
Fie, children, frightened of the dark!
I have ranged this mountain, when the lark
On her nest shivered, for lambs new born,
Or an agèd dog the wolf had torn.
When chill day whitens, we three divide.
With you, for comrade and for guide
Go patient strength, and constant will.

SHEPHERD
All my life is your service still,
That the unguessed fire burn strong and high
Lest you feel cold and know not why.

DUCHESS
You, bear aloft your proper fire,
Unappeased, unattained desire;
Nor brow nor cheek holds more of light
Than windy clouds a moonlight night,
Beauty rides high, untouched, austere,
Far.

PIEPOWDER
Nay, confessed in presence here.
You are a heaven-born stray on earth
Seeking the country of your birth;
Angels, your first playmates, attend you.

DUCHESS
Farewell: a sunshine day God send you.
Now all is said that may beseem,
And look, the east begins to dream!

ACT IV

A loggia, opening on a high terrace: below may be seen the palace gate. The seven Waiting Gentlewomen.

IPPOLYTA
You have the gem, dear Orsola,
Safe?

ORSOLA
In my breast, Ippolyta.

LAODOMIA
Mafalda holds the girdle's gold
That so long empty lay, and cold.

ISOTTA
Its dædal stones, cleft never apart,
Soon shall be warmed against her heart.

ARIANNA
Here is the deep-furred pall.

FIAMMETTA
Her state
She will not assume ere at the gate
Showing herself, when all the poor
Her moonèd beauty caress secure.

MAFALDA
How fair she comes!

IPPOLYTA
The Duke is by.

ARIANNA
What if the marriage song we try?

THE SEVEN GENTLEWOMEN
First when Phosphor trembled, lucent-pale,
Ere dawn's rose had flowered across the sky,
When a chill wind restlessly
All the jasmine's sweets had shed
And withdrawn day's cloudy veil,
"Open sweet eyelids," cried we, "leave your maiden bed
We have cherishèd,
And your white dreams, in the sun's beams at last to bind
The noble heart fast to the constant mind!"

DUCHESS
Good-morrow again, hearts debonair,
Whose excellency can declare
No tongue, nor compass any mind,
Nor time on earth your likeness find.
Look, in your grace my soul I dress
To-day, you lend me worthiness.

ARIANNA
Love unearthly and without spot
The forms of I and Thou knows not;
We vibrate to your strong control
In diapason full, one soul.

DUKE
Lingering beside this marble seat,
Maids, break not off: your cadence sweet
The scaly lizard charms: his throat
Tremulous, quivers to the note.
With lisp and plash in mossy urn
The fountain every fall and turn
Reiterates, echoing plaintively
To hollow lilies shaken with spray.

The seven Gentlewomen, withdrawn in the loggia, sing among themselves or talk by snatches.

THE SEVEN
Sun, old sun, upon the small gold head
By its heavy tresses overweighed,
And the beryl-inwoven braid,
Rain a glory, shroud the bride,
All her goodly white and red,
Ardent, fairer than the pearl, and steady-eyed.
From our side
Secure she goes, for love she knows, who sole can bind
The noble heart fast to the constant mind.

DUKE
You lost, the spark of soul was gone.
The huge world's substance seemed withdrawn,
Till among shadowy accidents
Hollow I walked in blind intents.
Even through the battle's straining force
Where man cleaves man, horse tears at horse,
I paused to question why I strove
And scorned the useless end thereof;

Put off the armour's bright inlay,
Turned, and from triumph rode away.
At Milan, to my young advice
The Emperor's self paid honour twice.
He walked, an arm about my neck;
There hung this toy, my breast to deck
With Jason's quest, Medea's wrong;
I was glad in it one hour long.

ISOTTA

Forth, for winter is past,
Sweethearts, at last.
Clouds in the curded blue
Sail whitely aloft,
Rains rustle soft
Shimmering with sun-streaks through.

IPPOLYTA

Crocus and tulip trim
Their chalices brim
As lessening nights allow.
Tender and ardent green,
Rose-blooms between,
Fledges the youngling bough.

DUKE

At last God chose I go to Rome,
And in the shade of the great Dome
Hold with the Pope some conference;
Great prelates dyed the audience
Blood-red and Tyrian; cap at knee
Princes assented, I and he
Having our say out, much at one;

And when the lordly farce was done
And I was sickening for home,
— For it stinks in my nose, does Rome —
"Yet I will speed you," said the Pope,
"As Pontiff," and I saw a hope
Where other talisman was none:
A mass to my intention
Said by a saint in that vast gloom
Which shrines the prince-apostle's tomb.
Genial, the great Pope shook his head:
"What should saints do at Rome?" he said,
Scanning with humorous eye the throng
Where prides and pomps and lusts showed strong;
Yet through gold, purple, scarlet, lay
An ashen thread, Franciscan grey.
He signed, and cat-like stepped to call
The Order's gaunt shrewd General.
— One saint, a parish priest, might be
In swarming, foul Trastevvere.
Fetched by a gorgeous church-steward,
At nightfall next, I pressed him hard
To do mine and the good Pope's will.
White, hushed, and meek, he checked me still:
"I can ask not God for goods, if aught
Less than all good be blessing-fraught.
So your heart's wish is His will too,
Each instant fills the soul of you."
He blessed me and went; each day again
His prayers like rain have fallen since then;
Not any more I saw his face,
Yet in my heart sprang herb-of-grace,
And I have been content to wait,
Secure God lured me back my mate,

Touched your arm, led feet unbenighted
Though ways should wind and inns invited;
And for love's sake, unwearièd
I have ruled my people as in your stead.

LAODOMIA

Orange bees all noon
Will drowse, and a moon
Will dream in the amber west;
But warm hours drift away,
Night swallows day;
You shall pass with the rest.

DUKE

I rode, that day of earliest frost,
After a wounded stag, till, lost
My way in mountain fastnesses,
In icy cell an anchoress
Sheltered the deer, but succoured me.

DUCHESS

That day is safe in memory.

DUKE

In cloth of frieze, your hair close-bound,
Folded your delicate brows around,
Your white feet as the white frost cold,
You stood, like the worn goddess old
On that last Roman-bought relief,
And for surprise, and pity, and grief,
My calmèd soul turned sick and hot.

DUCHESS

I was at peace, though you were not.

DUKE
How often I came again, how prayed,
Before you left your horrid shade,
Your savage rocks, reluctant came
To your high place and your great name
And the splendid ornaments thereof.

ARIANNA
Death's hand strikes on the door,
Charon his oar
Plies where the light ghosts move.
White flesh wastes in the dust,
Gold hair will rust
Though lilies sweeten above.

DUCHESS
I came, for these were here, and love.

ORSOLA
Kind is our lord love's might
But brief is delight;
Live in the hurrying day!
Fragrant as April air,
Supple and fair,
Laugh and love while ye may!

FIAMMETTA
Idle and light, this likes me ill.

MAFALDA
The ancient song falls sweetlier, still.

His is the sign
That we follow after,
By tears for wine

And sighing for laughter
He is known divine.

THE SEVEN

Welladay!
How shall one service accord,
Or set her feet in the way
Of love, our tyrannous lord?

DUCHESS

Ah, my dear lord, the dusty ways,
The mountain sheep-cote's earthlier grace,
The wood that star-dawn never knew,
Were stages on the road to you.

DUKE

You are the same she who one day
Held converse of love's perfect way
And all the time between is nought,
Sunk beyond speech, beyond even thought,
Forgotten of us, unguessed of men.

DUCHESS

Not such the doctrine you spoke then.
Though you are, my lord, no neophyte,
Affords love's quintessential might
Courage in this, life's ultimate proof,
To fix another soul's behoof,
You to guide? . . . Love is the unplumbed green,
Thither flows all, it is salt and clean;
And love, the phœnix's rich pyre,
Turns all to hieratic fire.
So, all my life and the acts thereof
Are parcel of this moment's love.

Think you that if I held it shame
To have adored twice, thrice, his name
Holy — not held it excellence
To have loved nobly, soul and sense,
Should I stand robed to-day to wed?
Should I not be this long time dead?
The string accordant to my soul
You are, the part that makes me whole;
One blood through members fashioned like
Flows, in our breasts the same hours strike;
Mine are your folk, this duchy great
My flesh cries out to as my state.
These I would serve a long life through,
And my sweet seven, and, dear lord, you.
But man can serve not till he is free,
And hard won is soul's liberty.
In the mid-forest's chill recess
The virtue I proved of loneliness,
The discipline of the heart self-known,
The grace of recollection:
Till the ancient oaks uttered their spell
One hour, the light turned audible;
Till the eye, — threading the thick wood
At noon, where slender and listening, stood
Dark stems 'mid delicate boughs, all seen
In a strange air, golden and green —
Grew penetrant, felt at point to see
Not far depths, but infinity.
Thereafter I knew, who loves one form
How bright soever, how white and warm
And tender, all fairness learns to love.
And the vision grew, winging above,
Where lovely ideas and dreams abide,

Delicate poesy, slumberous-eyed
Music, the ardours of poignant life;
So, beyond time's drift, fortune's strife,
— Spirit and blood being stricken mute —
Last, I saw Beauty absolute,
One, unalloyed; in whose compare
Our growing, perishing earthly fair
Is as cloud-shadow on waters fleet;
Waning nor waxing not, complete,
Self-poised; 'mid thought's evanishings
Stablest of perdurable things.
I walk, since orbed that hour on me,
Free, in that light see differently
Perhaps. You have my doctrine, have
My love on earth and in the grave;
Your own so equal is in measure
That each can give exhaustless treasure
A life long, without bankruptcy,
So, no debts lie 'twixt you and me.
One thing I owe: this shining seven,
In love than yours more perfect even,
Shame for my sake long underwent.
Therefore it is my fixed intent
An hour hence at the palace gate
Where children and old women wait
Already, and all the town shall be
Greeting their duchess honourably,
That my handmaiden's names be clean
To tell the tale of what has been.

DUKE
Though many a swine your pearls will swill,
My Duchess, do your gallant will.

I will draw up my troops at hand
So clowns who no word understand
With a foul word flush not your cheek.

DUCHESS
Wrong them not. To a spirit meek
The simple heart is ever kind.

DUKE
You shame me to a better mind;
Say what you will, it shall be right.

IPPOLYTA
Please you, madonna, to be dight?
All the townsfolk already are come.
Can you not hear the insistent hum?

DUCHESS
Mount to the loggia, and there deck me
Duchess and spouse, fair as men reck me.
First kiss me, hearts. Child, your dense hair
Lies on your neck too much. Unware
Grown softer, are grown no whit less wise,
Laodomia, your brown-green eyes.
Isotta of the archèd brows,
You are pale with sitting in the house
At virginals or broidery.
Fiammetta's thin red mouth to me
Sweeter than wine is. Orsola,
Your whiter hands than cassia
Must bind the jewel's flickering light
Upon my brow — nay, bind it tight,
My father's name is in the glow.
The girdle, quick, Mafalda. So!

Though I, now being no more free,
Love-cinctured go contentedly,
Still, let me pause a breath, and rest
My head upon your fragrant breast
Before my state I take upon.
The momentary chill is done.
Now clasp the heavy minever
About my throat, than yours less fair,
Arianna. Maids, ring me around.
My Duke awaits, on this high ground
The last thing I shall do alone.

The Duchess goes down the steps, surrounded by her gentlewomen, and crosses the lower terrace toward the stair which mounts from the gate. From the bench by the fountain, the Duke and those who join him can see but cannot hear.

The one-time shepherd, cowled and habited in the white Carthusian dress, separates from the compact and motley crowd which is about the Duchess, and passing along the lowest terrace, climbs by narrower steps to where stands the Duke in dark dress and unattended. Afterwards from the same direction comes Piepowder and salutes the Duke.

DUKE
Day shadows o'er when she is gone.
O radiant heart immaculate,
Stronger than change, surer than fate,
God keep me in your light! Amen.
Who leaves the eager, crowding men?

SHEPHERD
That flower of all sweet eloquence,
Mirror of wit, her Excellence
The Duchess, I have words for her.

DUKE
Yonder from down the marble stair
The Duchess talks with her own folk
Freely, and when the rest have spoke,
Father, you shall command her ear.

SHEPHERD
Let me attend her coming here.

DUKE
Does your despatch come from afar?

SHEPHERD
Farther beyond the farthest star
Than that from us. God led me hither
Who went, last night, I knew not whither.
I thought I lay in town to assist
But at the Blessed Eucharist
Where the cathedral rears in air
Its storied front above the square,
With twisted shafts about the door
On lions based, each grinning o'er
A hind he rends with blood impassioned, —
All of old sullen porphyry fashioned.
Mass done, I drifted with the press
Of citizens in feast-day dress
That jostled palaceward; and, free
While velvet stuffs and cramoisie
Trailed down the marble, flight by flight,
And a star shook on her brows white,
Descending, ringed by girls, in guise
Like pied and fluttering butterflies,
Shone, like a dream rememberèd,
That gold, that unforgotten head!

DUKE
Under your hood — stay, whose that song?
For lute and voice the strain prolong.

PIEPOWDER
The faithful heart no murmurous peace requireth,
Nor richer joy desireth
Than leave to worship meetly.
O love fulfilled, though two be one completely,
Ends all love so?
O no, no, no, no!
Yet interfusèd quires consort most sweetly.

Though passion into song can hammer sorrow,
And discord raptures borrow,
And faith most flourish thwarted,
Yea, love grow heavenliest whenas loves are parted,
Ends all love so?
O no, no, no, no!
For love denied fares ever lonely-hearted.

Your Excellence, when, this holiday,
The whole poor world has leave to stray,
Hear graciously a poor lute-player
Who rests, your constant good-luck-prayër.

DUKE
Is the speech at the gateway done?

PIEPOWDER
Our Duchess-lady had scarce begun,
The throng so flocked and cried, to bless
Her strength refound and loveliness.

What, shepherd, so you did find God,
As you were sent?

SHEPHERD

By paths untrod
I have reached, at last, love's perfect way.
What fetched you hither on this day,
Messer Piepowder?

PIEPOWDER

To look upon
Once more those emeralds, and be gone
Ever on my tireless march again;
Great gladness bought with such small pain.
Highness, you stand displeased and loth,
But the same power that called us both
Calls the stork back from Pyramids
When spring first opens rose-flushed lids,
And in bright streams distils the snow.

DUKE

Your excellent good wills I know,
And take your hands each, if I may;
I am more moved than I can say.
Yet if you go my thanks are doubled —
I would not have the Duchess troubled.

PIEPOWDER

She is worth, kind lord, a lustier faith,
Who proves not, loves not, the word saith.
She who would nor eat nor drink with me
Owning another loyalty,
She who has deigned become your spouse

To bear sons to your princely house,
She, whom this monk is jealous of
For God and not for any love
Touched humanly, — O, Duke, you miss
The very, unmatched, pearl she is,
By which rock-veined soft gold is dust,
If in your deep heart's treasury, trust
Be so a-wanting!

DUKE

Truth indeed,
But the fault springs from bitter need.
Loving a visitant high and wise
How shall I find grace in her eyes?

PIEPOWDER

So as in God's eyes, even by grace,
And grow by gazing on her face.
That, brother austere, why venture seeing?
No adept you of vivid Being,
Preaching pain's perfect alchemy.

SHEPHERD

I would teach immortal ecstasy.
First, I would hold her ear with song.
Comrade, my pipe is lost since long,
Touch you your lute, but wistfully,
And let my poor weak cunning try
Again the tender dawn-song over.

An hour before the weeping day
Had fired the white and green,
Three Maries took the garden way,

And one was Magdalene.
They talked of great doors barred and locked
And nobody astir,
They found an empty cave, that mocked
The fine lawn and the myrrh.
Yet one tear-blinded girl did meet
She thought, the gardener;
She fell to kiss his wounded feet:
"Mary!" he said to her.

Pray, were not that the worthiest lover
For the white soul? Then I should say,
— I have rehearsed it day by day:
All things go by, and change, and are no more,
And that can never be which was before.
The perfect kiss of perfect lovers, the hour
Which is an amorous lifetime's fieriest flower
Withers, the instant fleets, the love may range
Or die, for what shall be sure, except change?
Then from this tragic and tumultuous sea,
This refluent waste of mutability,
Where we lie drowning, palsied feet and breast,
Or drift, where nothing stable is to rest,
Is there no rescue? Yea. One walks dry-shod
On the shifting waves to take us: He is God.
And all the crash and thunder of the sea
Turns to the silence of His constancy,
When we find, lying close upon His breast,
That the wheel's centre, absolute, is at rest.
Exiles we wander, stubborn sons of Eve,
Striving the grey day's burdens to deceive,
And to the night's hot languors to afford
Relief, in vain, all vain, not knowing, O Lord,

Thou didst create us for Thyself, and we
Can for our souls find rest only in Thee.
But O how poor, how dull is sense,
How strait, to measure the immense,
How dark, to scan deep space withdrawn,
When in the pallid air of dawn
To seek the bride, the Heavenly Spouse
Comes to the dim and low-browed house!
The vigilant soul, that when He knocks
Opens, shall find her Master's locks
Damp with chill dew, His wounded feet
With spikenard and camphire sweet.
O now not hers to watch and miss,
The Master comes and calls for His.
Along the pleachèd herby walk
Rose-girt, she goes in tender talk
With frankincense about her shed;
She hears the stir above her head
Of unseen wings, presences holy
Henceforth to wait upon her lowly
And at her will tune their bright throats
In rapturous descant, their own notes
Seraphic, which they used to sing
Age-long and sleepless, — echoing
From the pearl-gated city white
Firm-stablished upon chrysolite.
Yea, and that glorious city has come down
Decked like a bride; the Lamb reigns from His throne!
For where the clustered shafts that never tire
Lift the far, shadowy vaulting to aspire,
And through the hushed, warm, odorous dusk the eyes
Mark, far aloft, bluer than deep noon skies,
Or decked in ardent reds past day-set's glories,

Ranged round, the potentates of saintly stories:
When, at the hours on either edge of night,
The sapphire panes blaze with their proper light
Unearthly, when the vast space tremulous
Grows with deep plaintive song melodious,
That turns and falls and mounts to sudden cry
As I have seen a bird in great winds fly:
When the pale tapers ray their pointed fires,
When the orient incense wreathes in thickening spires
Or filmy smokes, evermore upward bearing
A thousand grieved prayers in their heaven-faring:
When, stiff with gold and scarlet, jewel-sown,
The priest invests pomp the Lord would not own,
The sad world's gifts in homage brought too late
To Him who went but once in purple state,
Yet is Kings' King and Emperors' Emperor
And reigns in splendour ever and ever more:
When hearts are hushed, and eyes are veiled, alone,
Organs and quires checking their jubilant tone,
Then the sharp sacring-bell shrills out to tell
What overhead the bourdon's heavy knell
Gives on — the word through the wide careless town,
This is my Body: for God has come down.
Even the fair Christ that supped with His beloved
Stands on the altar-stone in Presence proved,
And all the throng of bygone years and ways
Rings Him around, deepening the incense-haze.
Salt sweat, tears, blood, all anguish spirits have borne,
Flames of triumphant hopes, or joys forlorn,
All men aspired to, sought or dreamed or planned,
He holds in the hollow of His piercèd hand;
While, seen as rays around His dazzling brows,
Muster the saints and servants of His house.

Since, then, so brief and evil is our day
And such delight harbours love's perfect way,
O, if you love, must it not stand approved
You will turn thitherward those feet beloved?

PIEPOWDER
The people, who as hushed have been
As before storms the wood-folk green,
Murmur and stir under the winds
That blow about their startled minds.
Here come three ancient spinners, who
Shall tell us all the discourse through.

DUKE
I will stand back; set them to talk.

MADDALENA
Bless me — not one step more I walk!

EVA
Sit here. These gentlemen are good.

MICAËLA
And player's hosen and white monk's hood
Own to the distaff kinship near.

MADDALENA
Messer Piepowder, what halts you here?

PIEPOWDER
What brings you, gossip?

EVA
To see her wed
Who has come back as from the dead.

PIEPOWDER
Pray you, for us resume her speech,
For we were out of hearing's reach.

MADDALENA
Who knows her matter?

EVA
Nay, not I.
Some such perhaps as stood close by,
For the throng pressed with murmurous noise
And buzzed above her singing voice.

MICAËLA
No soul divined her gracious words.
Ears not attuned to such high chords
Hear nothing, or a tuneless babble.

EVA
Fawning on her came all the rabble.

MICAËLA
They kissed her hands, her garmenting.

MADDALENA
Surely, she is a blessèd thing.

PIEPOWDER
Mark how the single eye can hit
And simple heart sees more than wit.

DUKE
Stir not, good souls, but spin and rest.

THE THREE SPINNERS
Our duty is our lord's behest.

DUKE
You have loved the Duchess long, and for
Her goodly father's sake of yore?

MADDALENA
I mind her lady mother, who died.
She was of Siena, narrow-eyed
And dolorous-lipped. The wind's caress
Breathed languorous on her loveliness.
Her long, slim fingers frail, showed flame
Against the sun: her delicate name,
Monna Alessandra, on all men's tongue
Grew Fiordespina; and poets sung
As Biancofiore her soul-fraught flesh.
How slept the sun in her locks' pale mesh!

EVA
Where our sweet lady's feet have been
Violets must stud the enamel green
For she walks chastely; her large eyes fair,
Tinged with cold green of sea-water,
Set singing, where they rest, one string,
And the heart vibrates, worshipping.

MICAËLA
Highness, God sometimes makes a creature
Of heavenly stuff though human feature,
Aloof from even the scent of sin,
Illuminate by a light within.
To such are penitence, grief, regret,

Alien, illusory, fiend-beset:
Woe to whoso offends them, woe!
God sets their feet where they should go.

DUCHESS
Was I an hour? The kindly throng
In strong love, confidence more strong,
Made me their voice and minister
To my girls. Messer Piepowder!
God give you grace of the wise feet
That fetched you hither to make complete
This glad day's gladness. I take each hand —.
Nay, kiss my two cheeks — nay, but stand!
Are we not comrades, through all years
Fellow-adepts and high compeers
In that good order of dusty-foot
War cannot scatter or sloth uproot?
Dear spouse and lord, here I commend
My bosom-jewel to you for friend;
And this third, where but two have been,
Pray you admit, dear Peregrin'.
You shall initiate of your craft,
Teach him the lost word night winds waft,
And that the green-streaked torrents cry,
And the great silence of the sky.
But through the dark months ominous
You and your lute shall sit with us,
Solace with song the rain-bound days,
Honour our palace with your bays.

DUKE
The spell is broken whereby he drew her
But it shall call his spirit to her.

PIEPOWDER
Say, Duchess, are your soft white feet
Safe in the way of all most sweet?
Nay, speak not; on your folded lips,
And in your eyes' sudden eclipse
I read, and knowing, I am content.

The seven Gentlewomen return with garlands to fetch the spouse.

ARIANNA
It is time your Excellencies went;
The hall fills up with wedding guests,
But the Duke dreams and the day rests.

DUCHESS
Aye. Sleeps, then, dear Piepowder, a hope
Till snow-clouds first blanch the blue cope.

DUKE
Good friends, farewell. Have me at heart.
You, too, farewell, who stand apart.

THE SEVEN
Roses, flushing faint auroral white,
Others heavy-headed, gold and red,
In old gardens nourished,
Frail narcissus, troubled sweet
As a pale saint's dreams at night,
Bay leaves crushed to glad the dust before her feet,
All odours meet,
Bring and strew, only no rue. Here time shall bind
The noble heart fast to the constant mind.

SHEPHERD
Stay, tender-heart, dear brightness, stay!

MADDALENA
You that cry, what have you to say?

SHEPHERD
O I would woo her love to God,
Leading her where His pierced feet trod!

EVA
Let her alone! A baby's hand
Groping upon her bosom bland
Will teach her more of God on high
Than all your stored divinity.

MADDALENA
Let her alone! The sweet Lord said
By love alone all debts were paid.
Her love is infinite: He knows.

MICAËLA
Let her alone! The Spirit blows:
His wisdom is immutable,
So are His ways inscrutable,
Yet souls endure unto the end,
And such are saved.

PIEPOWDER
They speak truth, friend.
Whither your way? The sun swings down.

SHEPHERD
My convent is a mountain's crown.
God's angels there take up abode.

PIEPOWDER
For me the secular Roman road
That runs, a dusty shimmering band,
From sea to sea slantwise the land.
Gossips, I will bring you a new song
When I come next.

THE THREE SPINNERS
Be that not long;
God bless your merry heart.

MADDALENA
The heart
That laughs must ache.

EVA
'Tis the wise part,
For sorrow knocks at each man's door
But mirth lies liefest with the poor.

MICAËLA
He that hath played for a great stake
His heart may ache but shall not break.

THE THREE SPINNERS
Good son, God keep you in his sight.

SHEPHERD
Farewell. I have far to go ere night.
Will you not turn to follow God,

Even to endure the yoke and rod?
For He exacts abjection first
But by grey Penance, Peace is nursed.

PIEPOWDER
Who can redeem his brother's soul?
We shall meet, may be, at the goal,
Though now our several ways divide
Even as straight lines, once crossed, run wide.
If yours is hot and rough and long,
Go with God's blessing and a song.

SHEPHERD
I wish you song, and blessing too,
Cool to sick hearts as breathing dew.

PIEPOWDER
Free, strong, and bearing, not in vain,
A not-intolerable pain,
Out of the scents and smoke and smother
Alone I go to the great mother.
Warm earth's green bosom shall give me rest
And strength the grey sea's heaving breast,
The winnowing winds shall search my soul.
When solemn hours resume the pole
And pale-stemmed lines of poplars gleam
That sigh and whisper along a stream,
Couched by the great road's glimmering white
I shall behold and hear all night
Along the skyey battlement
The starry sentinels ambient,
Where down the dark o'er-beetling walls
Arcturus to Antares calls

Till, to pass on the mighty cry,
Aldebaran climbs up the sky.
Then, while cold night-airs drowse and stir,
My heart shall keep the watch with her.
So shall forever-young desire,
Quickened and warmed by his own fire,
Following the still-advancing goal,
Guard silence in the enfranchised soul.

INTERPRETATION

Of this mystery, as of all, there are divers interpretations. The Duchess signifies Nature Benign, as may be guessed from the Shepherd's first song in recognition of her. The Wayfarer is the poet, for whom she is forever the Beloved, but yet less dear than the abstract and the eternal. The Shepherd is the natural man, for whom she is all that is, until she shows him God, and then he seeks her no more save as he would bring her into the glorious manifestation of redemption: the Duke is the man of science and the modern. Nature is his mate and his helper, by alliance with whom the sufferings of the masses shall be allayed, and all power reach attainment, all activity accomplishment.

Or, otherwise construed, the Duchess may be the human soul, that seeks in this way and that after perfection. The Wayfarer's is the life of the imagination and of reason; it is chilly, exacting, and barren: the Shepherd's is the life of the affections and beauty, and, as Faustus knew, the spirit turns to that only when foiled and weary. Neither can it satisfy always. The noble mind still feels the call to adventures and ideals too high for it, and finds content at last in a life of complexity and ceaseless endeavour. Equally and rightfully mated, in a world of duties and responsibilities, of friendships and mutual loyalties, the Duchess looks for faithful companionship to the Wanderer, but she does not even recognise the Shepherd under his white hood.

A third reading shall be for the nonce enough. The three Spinners stand for the wisdom of the world in its better no less than its baser aspects; their whimsical favour is won by quiet scorn, their profound comprehension is just and true. The Way is Life, which each soul, so it seeks not ignobly, shall ultimately, in its own kind, find the way of perfection.

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